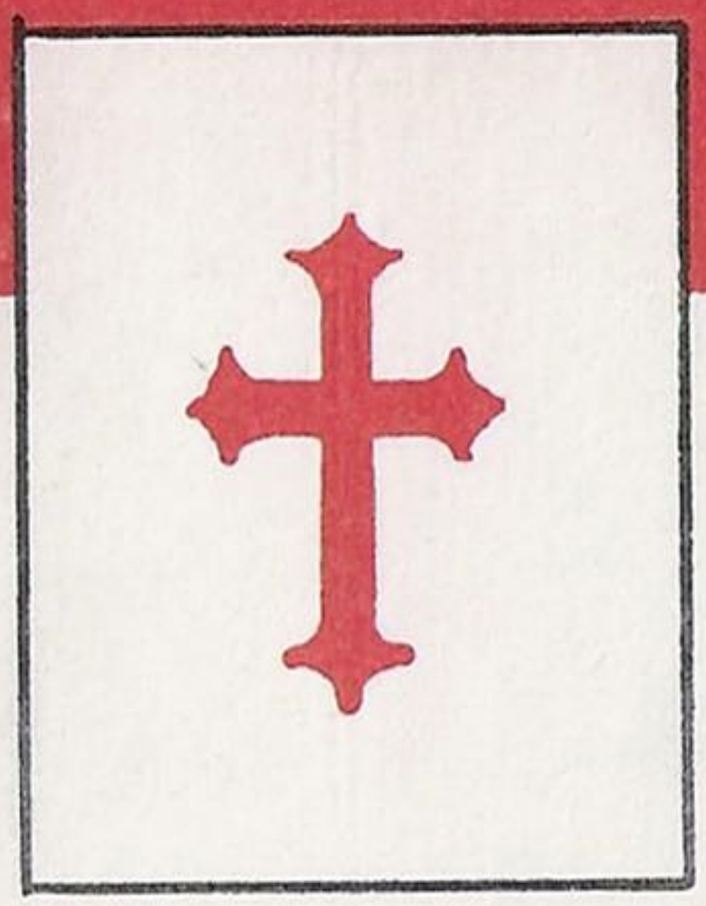

CHRIST'S SACRIFICIAL LOVE

By

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Why are Christians always dwelling on Faith, when Love is really the main theme of the Gospels?

Perhaps the right answer is that man is without love when he is without God, and that faith is man's way to God. Love is God's gift to those who believe. This appears, probably, to be a hard answer; for everyone thinks he knows what love is. Often we mistake sentimentality, possessiveness, or passion for real love. Christ's love is gentle and kind, but also hard as nails. Within it is no room for self-pity, maudlin sentiment, or grandiose passion which the world acclaims as love.

Faith introduces us to Christ, and Christ to that process of rigorous self-honesty called "conviction of sin." As we read more about the great Person of Christ,—noble, kind, fearless, forgiving, — we compare ourselves to Him and thus finally see these selves as we really are. Moreover, we are able to face honestly the bankruptcy of our personalities, because in comprehending His character, **we come to trust** His forgiveness. We can bear to face our guilt if we believe that we can be cleansed and forgiven.

Herein lies the point of ultimate importance. It is not simply **that we believe in God, but what we believe.** In other words, what counts is what we truly believe about the character and nature of God Himself.

Now the nature of God is revealed in Christ as completely forgiving, but at the same time rigorously demanding. When Peter asks if we are to forgive a brother who sins against us up to seven times, Jesus replies: "up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22) He means infinitely, and refers to the infinite forgiveness of God "Who for-

gives us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." However, the realization of such forgiveness is completely dependent on the sinner's honest admission of his own guilt and his desire to be forgiven. God's love and forgiveness in Christ is always there, -- but we may not want it. We may harden our hearts and pridefully refuse to admit we are wrong. God may yearn to grant us His forgiveness -- as we may yearn to forgive a friend — but neither God nor we can act until forgiveness is truly desired. On the other hand, our temptation may be to rush reconciliation because we cannot tolerate being at enmity with others. So great is this compulsion that we may even confess we are wrong when we are not, in order "to make up and be friends." This is the coward's way. God's way is sterner.

The Old Testament is full of examples of God's forgiveness to the truly penitent. King David, for instance, murdered his friend Uriah in order to have Uriah's wife. David's honest contrition, which aroused a practical desire in him never to repeat such a sin, was answered by God's complete forgiveness. On the other hand, the Scriptures are replete with many other examples of persons who did not repent and came to ultimate disaster; for it appears as an unwavering law of God that unrepentant evil brings on itself its own destruction.

Examples of Application

The practical application of this Christian apprehension of God is of the utmost importance to our daily lives. The problem of exercising sternness within forgiveness — which requires true emotional maturity — confronts us almost hourly in our relation-

ships with others. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and to pray for those who despitefully use us (Matthew 5:44). Even relatives are frequently those whom we love the most, yet whose peculiarities irritate us: our mothers, wives, children, or friends. Conflicts with loved ones are often the most painful. For example, a parent may continue to instruct and treat his offspring like children even after they have long since been adults. "Now, John, be sure to put on your rubbers" says mother to her thirty-year-old son. Here the son may fall from forgiveness into irritation. "Oh mother, why do you keep talking to me like a child?" he replies. Or, he may take the smug position that our parents "will always be like that," and take their admonitions with a simpering indulgence. A gentle but firm resistance is the answer — though this is more easily said than done! Resistance provokes irritation. In cases like this, I believe, we can most readily recognize our need for a love, wisdom, and poise which does not come from ourselves but from our Lord. Graciousness derives from grace.

The Employer-Employee Relationship

In business, examples abound of the paradoxic love, firm but gentle, which marked so deeply the character of Jesus.

Our boss calls us on the carpet. Thunderously he flails us — yet this time he is wrong. If we creep away without pointing out his mistake, we will hate ourselves as appeasing cowards — and him into the bargain. If, though, we "blow our tops" or sanctimoniously "straighten him out," we may lose our job. The Bible says (Ephesians 4:15): "Speak the truth in love." This means to be honest with him about his mistake, without being either malicious or overbear-

ing. It's like walking a tightrope. We step out on the rope. God provides the balance.

The Discipline of Children

Modern parents' problems of discipline of their children is a universal illustration of firm but forgiving love. Armed with the psychologists' nostrum that discipline will frustrate the child or curb his true creative personality, the parent readily spares the rod. Result: the child becomes self-willed, demanding, unmanageable, and secretly very insecure. Should this parent face squarely his own motives, he might discover that his fear of losing the child's love (if he disciplined the child) motivated him much more than the psychologists' theories. Disciplining the child does incur the risk of faith. Through it the parent **might** lose his child's love, and will lose it if the discipline is administered in a judgmental or malicious way. For the disciplining anger even of Christ — our spiritual parent — is still full of the loving zeal to correct and help us in every possible manner.

Christ's Love in Marriage

Perhaps the greatest test of Christian love occurs in marriage. Here, one personality can most readily dominate another. Here, more or less equal persons are paired, and two wills can most easily jar or offend each other. Here, the slightest human foible is expressed to the daily and minute observance of another human being. Moreover, encompassing all this is the constant strain of economic demands, the fearful responsibilities of parenthood, and the tremendous and mysterious influence of sex. What more crucial or difficult relationship could test the validity of all Christ means by His ex-

position of the nature of love? Let us give in to the pressures and demands of our partners, and we shall soon be the object of their contempt. Also, we shall have no life of our own. Let us not, however, fail to recognize how we ourselves, too, may be attempting to control and manipulate others, often through appearing weak and seeking sympathy, and we will see the need for contrition and repentance.

St. Paul compares marriage to Christ's union with His Church. The ideal would appear to be freedom in complete union. Complete freedom requires a will that can stand up and be true to itself. Union requires a will that is humble, submissive, and obedient. To exercise both virtues simultaneously and yet apart, can only come as the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Public Affairs

Practical examples of Christian love in action extend from intimate matters of family or business life to great public issues such as the conduct of international affairs. The actions of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in regard to Russia are a good case in point. (I would not overstate these actions, for there were surely elements of self-interest in them — yet they do illustrate in principle a basic Christian attitude.)

His first action was to recognize with realism the seriousness of the Communist threat, and accordingly to strengthen our armed forces. No more of the appeasement and weaknesses that tempted Hitler! His next action was to admit publicly the failure of the "Bay of Pigs" attack and to accept its mistake upon himself. Only those with the strength of humility can acknowledge openly their errors. Kennedy's third act was to

blockade the shipment of Soviet arms to Cuba. This time the "risk of faith" was atomic war itself. Kennedy took that risk and won the world's respect, and probably Khruschev's as well. His last act of international significance was to sell our surplus wheat to a hungry Russia. Thus he reached out the hand of friendship to the very enemy he had just chastened. We remember the Christ driving the money-changers from the temple, exacerbating the Scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, and later praying: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do", when they nailed Him to the Cross. It is this quality of the Christ-love that above all constrains us to believe that Jesus Christ is God.

Christ's Redemptive Sacrifice

Before He the God-Man went to that Cross, He taught His disciples: "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:24) What, precisely, was new about this commandment? Hadn't the ancient Jews likewise been taught to love?

The answer lies in what Jesus meant by love, and He defines His love by His actions. We must love one another **as He has loved us.** How has He loved us? By laying down His life for our sakes. "Greater love hath no man than this — that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13.) "Ye are my friends . . ." Saying this, Jesus went to Gethsemane and then Calvary for His friends. So one characteristic of this new love is that it is selfless — a love unto death.

Another characteristic shows it to be intense and universal. As shown before, Jesus taught love of one's enemies and lived it to His last breath upon the Cross. Yet, while He was agonizing there, His love was ever

reaching out: to the thief who was agonizing with Him, "Verily you will be in paradise with Me today" (Luke 23:43); to His mother and friend, "Woman, behold your son—Son, behold your mother" (John 19:26); to God, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46); and to all of us, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:43) Jesus loved the prostitute Mary Magdalene. He loved the poor and needy, and "looked with love" on the rich young man who came to Him. (Mark 10:21) His love for the sick was so great that it healed even those who only touched the hem of His garment. (Matthew 14:36) Later, after His death, His love would spread to the Gentiles and to all mankind.

This selfless, intense, universal love captivates us. We, too, want to be heroes and martyrs. Like Peter we would go to die with Him. All the disciples said they would. But, like Peter and those diciples, when the chips are down, we don't. (Matthew 26:56) To our humiliation, we deny and desert Him. As in the problems presented above, of exercising forgiveness in strength, we simply don't have the power within us. We admire it and want it; we believe in Jesus because of it — but we do not have it. Sacrificial love is not ours to give but to receive from Him.

Receiving depends on believing Who Jesus is and what He did. On Calvary was He just a noble man setting a great example? Or was He the Godhead in Manhood in the throes of a tremendous, mystical act taking upon Himself the sins of the whole world?

All of us can comprehend the terrible physical suffering of Jesus — the lashes, thorns, nails, thirst, suffocation. We can, perhaps, grasp something of the mental suffering of this most sensitive of men: the desertion of His friends, the mocking and

contempt, the rejection and persecution, the sight of His mother under the cross. But what can we know of His spiritual sufferings? The Bible says (II Corinthians 5:21) He became sin for us. What could this mean?

Have you ever been the object of terrible scathing contempt and hate from another, and by the grace of God, taken it upon yourself without hating in return? In mysterious love you somehow blotted up and transformed the other's hatred. Somehow, too, you sensed that the other was greatly relieved. You have accepted his hate without rejecting him. Now you can trust more and come nearer to others and to God.

This is God's grace acting in us, and provides a small example of Christ's spiritual suffering on the Cross. First we must coprehend that it is only in suffering for others that we may most truly pray for them. In suffering, then, we must understand totally and identify with their needs. Then we can pray.

Jesus had to take on mortal flesh to share and suffer with man in the common human situation. Now He was on the cross, His spirit tremendously sensitized by this physical and mental anguish. Suddenly, while still in mortal flesh, He broke through into a cosmic experience. His was the mind of God. In an eternal moment He saw, felt, and received freely to Himself the malice, cruelty, arrogance, and hatred of every single human who was or ever would be. In an incomprehensible comprehension He agonized and died for each of us intimately and personally. Always "the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), He had suffered mysteriously and prayed for mankind even before His birth on earth.

Now, however, He was taking sin into His very flesh, His being, forever. So great was the agony of this act — His commitment to and identification with our mortal condition — that He even felt He had lost contact with His Father. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He cried. (Matthew 27:46)

This is, and always will be, the heart of true love, the love that goes beyond itself to tremendous acts of heroism and kindness "even unto death:" the incarnational love of complete self-giveness and identity with others. This is the love of a single-minded and heartfelt attachment. It holds back no reservations, but without pride gives itself wholly and unconditionally. Going beyond itself to death, it is suddenly and wondrously transformed. Love raised Jesus from the grave.

Faith in Christ's Sacrifice is Death to Self

Thus love is not ours but God's. Ours is to give ourselves wholly to God and to our fellow man and to keep on giving until we are gone. Then love still will not be ours, but we will be Christ's and Christ is God's.

Thinking that this love is ours, appropriating it to ourselves, this is the greatest temptation of pride. To thwart this temptation there is but one answer: to believe truly and entirely Who He was — the God Incarnate — and what He did: giving Himself for all mankind. This is our salvation and our hope.

Incarnational Love Gives Away Self

Now what are the practical implications of Christ's redemptive death? First, there is His example. We, too, must take up our crosses, and like seeds, fall into the ground to die. (John 12:24) Such "dying to self" means dying to the narrow, prejudiced, habitual

world in which each of us is tempted to live, and being born again, through commitment, involvement, and identity with others, to their world. Practically speaking, this means that the real missionary will learn to eat the food, speak the language, and, perhaps, marry a woman of the people whom he has chosen to serve. And he will do this without denial, desertion, or contempt for the customs or mores of his own civilization. Most important of all, he will not foist his customs or ideology on them, but will lead by serving: to help them to be most truly themselves. This he will do, not primarily by preaching, but by living. Their privations will be his, their sorrows his, their triumphs his. He will weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn, and the people will know that he belongs to them. (Romans 12:15) This, above all, is the royal apostolic priesthood. It fills up what is yet lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Colossians 1:24), and brings the joy of human brotherhood that sets the cherubim singing.

Life in Christ: A Layman's Ministry

Nor is such single-minded self-giving and identification with others the call of missionaries or "ordained" ministers alone. It's the true calling or vocation of every Christ-filled man.

Take the example of the Christian called to business as his ministry. Today, he is caught in the terror of the profit-squeeze. With competition increasing, the temptation to narrow profits in order to obtain business increases. Will he be able to put himself in his competitors' shoes, identifying with their needs and fears, or will be lapse simply into pushing for himself and trampling all others underfoot? If the former, he can compete

without dishonor and win his competitors' respect — which is a victory for Christ in him. And equally important — can he put himself in his employees' shoes, seeing their need to share creatively in the policies of the business, and to defend their rights to decent wages, hours, and working conditions? Will he see himself as a servant of mankind, not short-changing his customers, but producing the best and most economical product so that every man may live more fully the abundant life which God intends for His world? But need I go on enumerating the Christian challenges to commitment of the housewife, artist, teacher, or politician? Each has his vast temptations; each his cross to bear; each an all-important job to fulfill if it is Christ's job for him.

Furthermore, each true Christian worker, as he moves to the fulfillment of his spiritual destiny, will possess the increasing and finally all-embracing need for Jesus Himself. The pressures will become greater; the temptations more sharp; the recognition more acute that, with all his seeming knowledge and good will, he is really only a babe-in-the-woods, understanding very little of his own selfish motivations and less of the nature of God. Most of his pride will diminish, that pride which, in the days of his youth, convinced him that he could do great things and prevail against evil. Now, travailing and heavy laden, he will come unto Him, (Matthew 11:28) not simply to be healed, forgiven, or comforted, but to rest forever in the bosom of a God Who loved and accepted him even "before the foundation of the earth." (Ephesians 1:4) Now he will really live by faith in the Son of God Who loved him and died for him. (Galatians 2:20)

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